

User education in higher education: helping academics join the learning environment

Gwyneth Price
University of London UK

Gwyneth Price, "User education in higher education: helping academics join the learning environment." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 27.

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/1999/papers/27>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



USER EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: HELPING ACADEMICS JOIN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Price, Gwyneth
Institute of Education University of London, UK.

E-mail: g.price@ioe.ac.uk

My view of academic librarianship is based on ten years of experience at the Institute of Education, which is a postgraduate college of the University of London. The Institute has a very high reputation as a research organisation, but academics are currently rather more exercised by the concepts of teaching and learning. As teacher trainers they are aware that their own learning and teaching strategy should be an exemplar for other organisations. In this paper I will examine some of the issues that concern me in relation to how lecturers themselves approach learning.

At the Institute of Education Library, as in most institutions, user education focuses on the needs of students, in our case postgraduate students following courses in teacher training as well as Masters and Doctoral students. We pride ourselves on our understanding of the library skills needed by these students and feedback from them, and from their teachers, suggests that we are successful. But we continue to feel concerned about the apparent failure of researchers and lecturers to gain the same levels of library expertise as their students. We know that this is the experience of other academic librarians in other Higher Education Institutions and we are tempted to believe that it is the academics who are failing rather than the librarians. Why is it that so many academic staff use the library as little as possible and then embarrass themselves with their lack of expertise? Why do they resort to the sort of tactics which would label students as failures?

My searches through the literature have shown me some unexpected answers to my questions, which should not have come as a surprise since in my experience academics write very little about libraries and librarians just write very little. The first thing that I discovered was that not much has been written about academic lecturers as learners. There is a great deal of interest in how students learn, but also an assumption that teaching and learning is a one way process, that is teachers teach & students learn and their roles are never reversed. Professional development for teachers seems to consist almost entirely of learning how to teach and using libraries does not seem to be part of the curriculum. In the UK the Institute for Learning and Teaching will accredit teaching qualifications for lecturers in Higher Education, as recommended by the Dearing Report [1]. Librarians should be working to ensure that library skills will be included in the course. My own experience of teaching new academics on courses at the Institute of Education is that many new lecturers see little point in learning how to use libraries. It is useful to examine some of the reasons for this apparent disinterest, which is shared by many experienced teachers.

A major area of concern for all our users is the inaccessibility of information to those without the necessary IT skills. We are probably all still dealing with a minority of students who fail to grasp the need for IT skills and we are aware of the inequality of opportunities to learn for those who have no access to IT equipment or training. IT skills are a much bigger issue for academics who find it difficult to see themselves in the role of learner. But the failure of academics to learn how to use computers should be seen in the same light as their 'failure' to learn how to use libraries. May it not be simply that they don't need these skills as much as we librarians suppose they should.

We need to pose some questions about why people use libraries. In an academic context we must suppose that students use them to find and read key texts for their studies, but these texts are increasingly available as study packs, sometimes in electronic form. For the most part students will use libraries to extend their knowledge of areas which particularly interest them and to research a topic for a dissertation or thesis. Invariably their tutor will provide them with some initial references, but after that they are on their own and the various databases accessible via the library are crucial to their research. It may be presumed that academic research and teaching will take this process further and that libraries will be crucial to their discovery of every possible source of information. A number of recent pieces of research have shown that academics do not work in this way and that they pay lip service to libraries, feel guilt about not using them, but still find traditional methods of information gathering more effective and much easier. Research carried out by Christine Barry and David Squires at Kings College, University of London [2], showed that despite intensive training and support in the use of databases and other IT systems, researchers in Education and in Science were equally still convinced that other methods worked better. Barry and Squires conclude that "academics only learn and use the IT-assisted information systems where they perceive themselves as having a need that can be met by that system" [3]. The 'Invisible College' of conferences, discussions over coffee and phone calls to colleagues has been joined by e-mail as the most effective ways of keeping up with the field, because of course the 'field' for an academic is very much narrower than the field for an undergraduate.

I've read all this and understood it but still felt a conviction that academics could do even better research if only they used all those wonderful resources which we librarians have gathered together and made available for them. I wanted this conference paper to include some proof about my theories; I felt sure someone must have written something scholarly and clever which I could quote in this paper, so I set out to make use of my library skills.

My starting point was a paper by Christine Barry which I had come across on a web site on 30th January 1997 (I know the date because fortunately I had printed it out). When I tried to access it again it had vanished but I did manage to find further references to Christine Barry and to the Information Access Project at Kings College. I made use of citation indexes and other electronic databases. I managed to persuade a librarian at University College London to let me use Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) on CD-ROM (because of course just when I wanted to do my research staff at the British Library were on strike) and while I was in the library at University College I browsed their shelves for other material. Realising that the browsing had been more effective than the database searching I browsed our own shelves of library literature at the Institute of Education. And while I did all this I felt

more and more frustrated by my inability to find what I wanted, which may or may not be there. So I went off to a conference of Education Librarians and we spent two days talking about the role of the librarian in supporting research. Celia Coates, Librarian at Nottingham Trent University, talked to us on the conference theme and referred to an article in a journal and I sat there and thought about why I hadn't browsed the journals because I had assumed that the indexes I'd searched would have provided any relevant references, but of course I'd missed this one. Finally Professor Mo Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University talked about what academics wanted from librarians and she confessed that her research for the paper had been done by sending one e-mail to a number of colleagues. The results were much more interesting than all my searching.

Mo Griffiths' respondents complained of just the problems I'd come across when I tried to access appropriate literature for my research. The library I really needed to use was closed. The databases I used weren't up to date so I had to look at recent updates in paper format; one of the databases was on CD-ROM with an interface which I hadn't used for some time so I had to spend time working out how to use it; it was extremely difficult to come up with explicit enough key words to reduce the number of irrelevant results; and when I did find something I then realised the computer I was using didn't have a printer. Very few of the references I discovered were immediately available, and Interlibrary loans was slower than I expected. The list could go on; and all my complaints are echoed in the responses from academics to Mo Griffiths enquiries.

So does this all mean that academics have got it right and librarians are deluding themselves? I don't think so. I think there are lessons for all of us. Librarians have to try harder to understand what our users really need, even when they don't know themselves. We should continue to support the needs of students, including acknowledging the information seeking skills available beyond the library. And we should look for ways to encourage and empower our academic colleagues. The idea that lecturers should teach library skills seems impractical. Librarianship is a profession; those of us who practice it have years of training and experience behind us; why do we imagine that academic colleagues should add these skills to their own considerable expertise when they seldom need or use them? What we need is a shared understanding. In a stimulating and thought provoking paper on the self-explanatory library, Philip Pacey [4] suggested that the reason librarians have failed to teach library skills to academic teachers is that they might then be more successful at teaching students than we are. While I agree with him wholeheartedly that library systems often stand in the way of easy access to information, I think we must acknowledge that the needs of academics and students are not the same.

The Fielden Report [5] referred to academic convergence as a goal, a belief echoed by the Follet Report [6] and elaborated by Mike Heery and Steve Morgan as 'academic integration' [7]. I'm pleased to note that my literature search uncovered an earlier reference to this approach in a paper by Schmidmaier to the Third IATUL Online User Education Seminar in 1986 [8]. Unfortunately these views are more easily shared by librarians than by academics whose first loyalty, as Duke [9] points out, is to their subject rather than to their institution or their students. What we need to do is encourage academics to understand the library needs of their students and get involved in rethinking not just teaching and learning strategies but the curriculum

itself. The current emphasis in the UK on subject review and quality in teaching provides librarians with an opportunity to share their beliefs with academic colleagues.

We all know that Knossos wasn't built in a day, but we can start in small and sometimes subtle ways. At my Institution academics often join their students for library induction sessions in an environment where they feel safe enough to admit they are learning too. Social events, meetings, involvement in the Academic Board are all ways of getting to know my colleagues. I also make it known that I see myself as a teacher as well as a librarian. Perhaps more importantly I see myself as a learner. In all the literature about lifelong learning and the learning society there appears to be very little mention of teachers as learners. I believe that the sharing of ideas must be a two way process, but I am aware that teachers work for the most part as individuals and librarians have a responsibility to share our more collegial working ethos. Above all, if we enjoy our work and talk to academic colleagues with enthusiasm, at least some of them will begin to want to know more about what we do and why we do it.

1. National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. Higher education in the learning society. London, Stationery Office, 1997. (The Dearing Report)
2. SQUIRES, David, BARRY, Christine and FUNSTON, Tania. The use of IT-assisted information systems in academic research: phase 1: implementation, learning and early take-up of systems. British Library Research and Development Department, 1995 (British Library R & D Report 6215).
3. BARRY, Christine A. and SQUIRES, David. Why the move from traditional information-seeking to the electronic library is not straightforward for academic users: some surprising findings. Online Information Proceedings December 1995: pp.177-187.
4. PACEY, Philip. Teaching user education, learning information skills; or, Towards the self-explanatory library. The New Review of Academic Librarianship, 1995: pp.95-103.
5. FIELDEN, J. Supporting expansion: a report on human resource management in academic libraries for the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group. Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993. (Fielden Report).
6. Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group. Report. Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993. (Follett Report).
7. HEERY, Mike and MORGAN, Steve. Practical strategies for the modern academic library. London, Association for Information Management, 1996.
8. SCHMIDMAIER, Dieter. The education of the educators: a great problem in the field of online user education. Selected papers from the Proceedings of the Third IATUL Online User Education Seminar held at BUTC Compiègne in July 1986. IATUL Quarterly 1(1), 1987: pp.121-127.
9. DUKE, Chris. The learning university: towards a new paradigm? Bristol, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1992. (The cutting edge)

Bibliographic details

Gwyneth Price is a Student Services Librarian at The Institute of Education

University of London, where she has worked for ten years. She is responsible for user education and reading list provision and is currently interested in the development of the digital library and provision of services for Distance Learners. Before joining the Institute, Gwyneth worked as a Secondary School teacher and School Librarian. She has also worked as a teacher in Adult Education and with young children in museums.

Address:

*Library and Media Services,
Institute of Education,
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
United Kingdom*